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Emphasis on verification

The well-laundered public version of the Senate Intelligence Committee's secret report on U.S. capacity to "monitor" the SALT II accord is a blandly ambiguous document, whose guarded phrases are delicately calculated to bridge rather than aggravate disputes.

Pro-SALT senators will doubtless draw comfort from the committee's findings that "in most cases, monitoring requirements were given high priority during treaty negotiations"; that "under current Soviet practices, most counting provisions [i.e., of launch vehicles] can be monitored with high or moderate confidence," as with slightly less confidence may be "qualitative limitations on weapons systems"; and, finally, that the treaty on the whole "enhances the ability of the U.S. to monitor those components of Soviet strategic weapons forces which are subject to (its) limitations."

Anti-SALT senators, however, are not denied cautionary conclusions. There is the admission that certain loopholes in the *first* SALT accord allowed the Soviets to spring some unanticipated and unpleasant "surprises," such as the emplacement of the larger SS-19 missiles in enlarged SS-11 silos, in circumvention of "safeguards the U.S. thought it had obtained in SALT I." Another surprise, the committee reminds us, was that "the range of the SS-N-8 missile on the Delta class Soviet . . . submarine was greater than expected," and thus enlarged concessions given the Soviets under a different estimate. And there is the disturbing admission that "intelligence of possible Soviet violation of the (SALT I) treaty was, in some cases, and for a time, withheld from executive branch officials who had a need for such information."

The report, then, is a mixed one, faintly tilting to the conclusion that for most vital purposes the U.S. is not deficient in "monitoring" capabilities; and that under the pending treaty they would easier to discharge.

But beyond that, even if serves to allay unrest about monitoring capability, the report raises understated but important questions about our determination and ability to exploit that capability.

Some of our colleagues, we are intrigued to see, soft-pedal that point. They suggest, remarkably, that the committee not only "does not pronounce on verification(,) it does not even mention the word," and that "the tone of the debate about the new report . . . indicate(s) that verification has been all but washed out as an issue on which final judgment of the treaty will be based."

This is a curious reading, in view of the committee's explicit statement (page 8, paragraph 2) that "the capability to determine whether the Soviets had violated the SALT II agreement would be of little consequence if at the same time the U.S. did not have the will and determination to pursue an aggressive *verification* policy." (Our emphasis.)

In fact, the burden of the Intelligence Committee report of October 5 — at least as we read it — is that "aggressive" verification (the will to press any suspicion of cheating or exploitation of the treaty terms before the Consultative Commission) is as essential to the nation's security as merely counting or measuring launch vehicles and missiles.

If the intelligence agencies are too bureaucratic to assemble and report suspicions promptly and fully to the president and others who need to know; or if the evaluation of intelligence data is not constantly checked by politically independent assessors, as the committee suggests it should be; or if the president himself and the National Security Council are too keen to vindicate their judgment that the treaty is a good bet to make a potentially disruptive issue of suspected violations, then not even the most sophisticated monitoring devices will count for much.

Verification, in short, remains a political act. And like all political acts it requires judgment, choice, wisdom and the courage to rock the boat. Verification, in fact, is not "washed up" as a determinative issue in treaty ratification. The report gives it renewed — and entirely approprite — emphasis.

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